

## Optimal English language learning in young people and adults

José Luis Sardiñas Companioni<sup>1\*</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6397-6225>

Rogelio Pérez Parrado<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2020-7626>

Damaris Romero Enriquez<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3580-7640>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Máximo Gómez Báez. Ciego de Ávila. Cuba

\*Author for the correspondence: [josesc@sma.unica.cu](mailto:josesc@sma.unica.cu)

### ABSTRACT

Controversial criteria on the ideal age for learning English have been addressed by foreign and national linguists. Without absolutizing theoretical positions, a systematization is made on the advantages and disadvantages of learning this language and criteria are offered on its relevance in young people and adults, so the objective of the article is to offer dimensions and indicators to be considered so that both the teacher and the young people and adults can produce a meaningful teaching-learning process in the English language under optimal conditions. The analytical-synthetic, inductive-deductive, and observational methods were used.

**Keywords:** English language learning; Age group; Optimal conditions; Meaningful learning.

### Introduction

Cuban educational policy has among its purposes to have a human being capable of knowing, understanding and transforming the world on a scientific basis, impregnated with its values and its socio-economic environment, since today's society demands competent people to access the diverse, complex and multifaceted world of scientific knowledge. The learning of foreign languages contributes to this policy - the English language among those prioritized - which has become a necessity of current

development to face the social demands of science, technology, and the culture of the present century in which the accelerated development of information technology and communications prevails.

For young and adult learners of different profiles, learning this language is a working tool to obtain information from academic, scientific and specialized materials, which allows them to understand, speak, read and write in this language. At the same time, the interests and aspirations of young people and adults who opt for jobs, both in Cuba in the tourism sector and abroad, are related to the skills of comprehension and oral expression in English as a means of communication. In order to contribute to the above aspirations, English language courses and programs of short and medium duration have been designed and implemented by the university's English language professors aimed at professionals from the university itself, from provincial institutions and companies in the territory of Avila, and from the non-state sector; however, the structuralist approach has predominated in the courses and programs, and to a lesser extent other courses and programs have emphasized spontaneous oral communication.

Learning the English language is precisely a controversial aspect in the aspirations of young and adult learners if one takes into consideration that in current times there is a proliferation of methods, courses, approaches, procedures, and techniques to - in a short time - achieve speaking the English language in accordance with the demands of the future occupational profiles of the learners.

Academics and linguists have searched for the most favorable procedures and variants to achieve the development of English language skills. Among the most recent are the general English courses that, although they have a pertinent linguistic-methodological order in the integrated treatment of the basic skills: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing, the time to achieve the objectives in young and adult learners is long, since they need the brevity in the elementary preparation to continue the deepening in specialized courses for professional or personal purposes.

However, it is assumed that these variants have a high linguistic value, but if they are accompanied by optimal conditions, the result is superior, an aspect that is overlooked by teachers who teach English to learners of these age groups.

The English language is an indispensable requirement for professionals. Among the most recurrent are teachers and researchers for processes of teaching and scientific categories in Cuban universities, young people and adults who aspire to study medium and higher specialties in the tourism sector.

On the other hand, medical professionals are required to take the medical specialty exams (Residents) to obtain a B1 level, as established in the demanding Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002), as well as for students of Study Plan E, who upon completing the third year of their respective careers must accredit this level in higher education centers.

It is a challenge for non-professional learners who are urged to learn for personal interests - in a short period of time - such as a job contract in Spanish-speaking or English-speaking countries where English is required as a prerequisite for employment, given the current social mobility. Faced with these challenges, the experience of pedagogical practice for several years indicates that for the interests shown by the learners it is preferable to have a short course that prepares them at an elementary level to overcome future language challenges in subsequent levels or stages.

From the methodological point of view, the innovations and information and communication technologies of the 21st century have incorporated new procedures in the direction of the teaching-learning process of the English language, which have as epistemological supports the genesis of the methods defended by the classics of different times: Grammar translation, Direct, Reading, Structural, Audio-lingual, and Cognitive (Cerdas & Ramírez, 2015).

The current conception of English language teaching, without absolutizing criteria, is permeated by terms such as methods, courses, approaches, trends, or techniques, which gives it an eclectic character of integration of didactic procedures by taking up the most favorable practices according to the objective of the learners in the teaching-learning process of this language.

Therefore, given the urgency of young and adult learners to achieve spontaneous oral communication, the need arose to design and implement an English language course to meet their needs in the short term.

It was not intended to have high linguistic pretensions, since it was rather conceived for those people who had not received the English language for various reasons, and who are currently interested in learning it for various purposes, or others who have repeatedly started English language courses and have abandoned them due to the frustration of not being able to overcome the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical demands orally through functions and communicative situations of everyday life.

Based on the experience in pedagogical practice and the search for new ways to achieve meaningful learning in the English language, the objective of this article is to offer

dimensions and indicators that are necessary for young and adult learners to produce learning in the English language that lasts under optimal conditions.

## **Development**

The systematization of the theoretical contributions of relevant linguists: (Penfield & Roberts, 1969), (Hymes & Gumpers, 1972), (Canale & Swain, 1980), (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986) and (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1989) on the communicative approach, the didactic procedures to achieve a significant learning of the English language, and in relation to the most favored age group for learning the English language with its advantages and disadvantages, constitute necessary references for reflection.

In relation to the age of English language learners, the Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield & Roberts, 1969) establishes the developmental stage between 11 and 15 years of age as the limit stage of life to acquire a second language with the competence of a native speaker, since the ability to acquire the foreign language decreases when puberty is reached because the brain loses plasticity, with a significant decrease in capacity.

In relation to this limiting stage to achieve the competence of a native speaker, it is inferred that from birth the learner will be exposed to two communication channels: that of his or her socio-cultural context of origin and the second language he or she learns, where the system of influences of the two languages is reciprocal as there is inevitably linguistic and cultural interference, and of the family context where his or her personality is formed and developed. It is assumed that the first language is the native, authentic, vernacular language of the socio-cultural context of the individual, and as a second language another language in addition to the native language that is learned to communicate in any socio-cultural context.

Subsequently, studies conducted by (Krashen, 1997), whose research focused on the search for the most suitable age for learning a second language, revealed that adults have two barriers that limit them to learn a second language: the physiological one, known as the "age debate"; and the other barrier referring to whether a linguistic competence equivalent to that of a native speaker can be achieved. These theoretical

positions lead to consider age as a cardinal point for English language learning, an aspect that has its advantages and disadvantages.

Young people and adults can achieve English language learning in a situational context that favors continuous, spontaneous, daring interaction, without fear of error; hence, from the didactic point of view, creative procedures that favor the principles of the communicative approach proposed, among others, by (Canale & Swain, 1980) should be used.

The oral development in a dialogical and monologue form in young people and adults learning English is based on the approach defended by (Hymes & Gumpers, 1972), since it is about laying the foundations for the correct articulation of the segmental and suprasegmental phonemes of the English language, the use of the lexicon, the morphosyntactic structures and the registers of the language with the use of functions and communicative situations of the daily context. These assumptions are complemented with the training of auditory models and that contribute to the flexibility of the organs of phonation in a natural and circumstantial way, which will serve as motivation for the learning of the English language and its later use in a determined social context.

In this regard, authors such as (Antich, Gandarias, & López, 1986) agree in pointing out the stress of the youngster and the adult in the new learning situation, such as anxiety and worry that result in making a fool of oneself in front of the group of learners, fear of failure in language performance, uncertainty in using the English language, slowness in the pace of learning, frustration in imitating oral expression patterns, and auditory and phonatory limitations, all of which have repercussions in the learning process, uncertainty in using the English language, slow pace of learning, frustration in imitating speaking patterns, and auditory and phonatory limitations, all of which have repercussions on the learner's low self-esteem in learning and developing communicative skills in another language.

The problem of age in the learning of foreign languages has been a controversial issue for linguists of different tendencies in Europe and America, as it has been attributed advantages and disadvantages for the acquisition of phonetic, lexical, morphosyntactic and stylistic patterns. Other positions to consider from the linguistic and methodological point of view are given by the primacy of the oral language (oral advancement), which leads to the oral presentation and practice of linguistic material following the algorithm proposed by (Byrne, 1989): presentation, practice, and production of linguistic material,

without ignoring the organization of linguistic contents in a way that reflects the language system so that it can be analyzed by the learner at the same time that it is exercised, and that learning constitutes a fundamental means of communication.

The linking of linguistic content with the life and culture of the foreign language being learned is an aspect to be taken into account by the learner in order to achieve identification with the ways of saying and doing in everyday situations. This is achieved through the imitation of the referential patterns during the teaching activity and outside the classroom context through the teacher's way of acting as an essential pattern and the visualization of authentic materials.

In the Cuban context, the teaching-learning process of the English language in the study plans and programs, the English language is conceived as a foreign language, as a cultural component for the integral formation of the student, as was the Russian language at the time. It is not a question of overemphasizing the learning of the socio-cultural elements of English-speaking countries, nor of their way of life; it is a question of the learners acquiring the foreign language as a means of communication and broadening their cultural horizon.

The typological approach of the subsystems of the language approached by favor the sensitization of the learners towards the English language and its stylistic and cultural values, having as a base the autochthonous values of the native language, in this case the Cuban National Variant of Spanish. Linguistic comparison can be seen as a procedure to establish similarities and differences between a Romance language and a Germanic language to favor sensitivity, respect, and motivation for learning the English language. In our opinion, any age group needs to solve the essential contradiction between the interference of the native language in the foreign language being learned in its own socio-cultural context.

(Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1989) state the growing international interest in English language learning, particularly at the end of the 20th century. In the chapter devoted to *The Last Century in Language Learning and Teaching. A Brief Overview*, these linguists formulate three questions that are very relevant for teachers of English; The first is about people of different ages learning a second language, the second is about the motivation to continue studying a second language or to start learning a third language even if it is not a requirement for entry into a higher level academic program or to secure employment, and the third is about how teachers can improve the teaching of the

language so that learners do not complain that they have studied it for several years in school and still cannot say (or understand) a word.

For the first, one could ask what didactic conception is assumed in each of the components of the teaching-learning process: objectives, system of knowledge, system of skills, system of values, what method, approach, procedures, course, or typology of classes are used, what means or resources are used, how learning is controlled and evaluated on the basis of the objectives to be achieved in the class, the unit or in the academic course. In relation to the second question on motivation, the idea of the need and interest of the learner is supported so that the teacher can motivate him/her to learn through a good class that requires continuous interaction with the learner and finally the third question leads to reflect on how to achieve a developmental learning in the learners to leave behind monotony and tedium.

It is not unknown the hierarchical position attributed to the communicative approach in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages in young and adult learners, an approach that is assumed in this same process in the English language. In the oral production of their own mother tongue in the spontaneous communicative process, young learners and adults are not exempt from making mistakes, whether phonetic, lexical, syntactic or stylistic, either by ignorance or carelessness in the use of patterns and/or normative rules, which, despite not being inappropriate in cultured or formal language, do work in communicative contexts of everyday colloquial style.

In the functional-notional approach, (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1989) emphasize the role of communicative functions and situations, as well as of notions as lexical elements that provide meaning to the utterance, all of this as an immediate theoretical reference on which the communicative approach to foreign language is based.

In pedagogical practice, limitations are evident in the learning of the English language in young people and adults. Among them are reduced linguistic plasticity, which affects the assimilation of a completely new linguistic system, since those already fixed in their mother tongue are so well established.

These sometimes cause interference in learning essentially in the oral language; shyness, since the adult is not so spontaneous to participate actively, the fear of making mistakes in public prevails, or is afraid of failure; greater confidence in writing, resorting to graphemic visualization of the oral language that reproduces or produces, a disadvantage that has a negative impact on the assimilation of pronunciation.

These limitations recur in the group context also because of fear of correction by the other learner. The duration of the class, the concerns of the age of the young person and of the adult due to the social life they develop in various scenarios, including work, personal, family, and community, are non-linguistic factors that influence the learning of the English language.

However, young people and adults have potentialities that compensate for the limitations mentioned above, since they have learned to learn, to follow detailed instructions, to infer, deduce, compare, generalize, and seek their own self-learning mechanisms, and also avoid dispersing attention, so that if learning takes place through communicative functions and situations that arouse interest, through games, simulations, or other learning activities, the conscious assimilation of the linguistic content is achieved.

In this sense, the learning of the English language in learners urged by oral advancement should be centered on varied oral exercise and phonetic correction should be used from the understanding of the articulatory process through brief repetitions by the teacher and likewise by the learners who articulate correctly. To achieve these purposes, it is considered that the English language learning process requires teaching-learning stages, structured in the organizational form of a course so that young and adult learners can intervene in the determination and self-regulation of their own learning needs (Derakhshan, Tamaskani & Faribi, 2015), and feel the interest in developing communicative skills in the short, medium and long term to solve professional problems in the academic and research spheres.

By taking into consideration the particularities of young people and adults, the learning process should promote the organization and direction of actions that favor learning based on personal, family, social and professional experiences in pedagogical practice, autonomy and responsibility, the significance of knowledge, learning styles, the concreteness and clarity of objectives, the ability to concentrate on study, the level of reasoning, the willingness to communicate ideas orally with precision and the need for written representation of what is understood orally.

Seen in this way, then, the psycho-physiological limitations of teachers can be compensated, which are evident in the distrust of using the language in the professional context, the fear of failure in language performance, the slow pace of learning, the frustration in imitating oral expression patterns, the auditory and phonatory limitations, which do not favor the development of communicative skills.



In this regard, it is considered that the stimulation of group work should be taken into account in order to raise their study culture and self-esteem, taking into consideration the adult's particularities, needs and expectations.

The age dilemma is not the determining factor for learning English. Learning needs - to a greater or lesser degree - are present in all age groups, more marked in young people and adults, if it is assumed that when a young person or an adult decides to study the English language, there is an interest in this intentionality for personal or professional purposes.

It is assumed that if there are "optimal conditions" in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages, English language in particular, in any age group, the process should also be optimal from the psycho-physiological, didactic, linguistic, and pedagogical, methodological, pedagogical point of view, as well as the organization and structure of the group of learners.

It is not the purpose of this article to decide the most favored age group for English language learning, nor to assume from an eclectic position other theoretical positions in this regard; on the contrary, it is assumed that, due to the social nature of language and the real need for communication of young and adult learners, cognitive-communicative-affective-emotional development is essential to solve independently the problems that may arise in the use of the English language in social practice.

In the creation of optimal conditions, the learning strategies outlined by (O'Malley, 1993) that can be used by young and adult learners, among others, are valid:

- Repetition: the learner repeats the new item mentally or aloud until he/she considers that he/she can remember it and use it spontaneously.
- Contextualization: the learner gives a context to what is learned. He/she contextualizes a word or phrase, or changes the context of what has already been learned in order to broaden its application.

However, when resorting to the term "optimal conditions" for English language learning in young and adult learners, these are assumed to be the integration of linguistic, methodological, psycho-physiological, didactic, pedagogical, and organizational components that favor English language learning.

Based on the above criteria, the dimensions and indicators to be considered under optimal conditions are proposed.

**Pedagogic dimension:**

- ✓ Leading role of the English language teacher.
- ✓ Role of young and adult learners.
- ✓ Pedagogical principles.
- ✓ Socio-cultural context.

**Linguistic dimension:**

- ✓ Relevance of oral and written models in the English language.
- ✓ Gradation and selection of the contents of the levels of linguistic analysis: phonetics, lexicon, syntax.
- ✓ Contextualization of the styles and registers of the language based on the functions and communicative situations.
- ✓ Selection, sequencing, hierarchization and contextualization of the content of communicative functions and situations.
- ✓ Linguistic correctness in speech.

**Methodological dimension:**

- ✓ Methods
- ✓ Approaches
- ✓ Courses
- ✓ Procedures
- ✓ Alternatives

**Didactic dimension:**

- ✓ Class type
- ✓ Objectives.
- ✓ Knowledge system
- ✓ Skills system
- ✓ Value orientation
- ✓ Class moments: presentation, practice, and production.
- ✓ Interaction teacher-learner-group, and learner-learner.
- ✓ Didactic mediators
- ✓ Relationship between communicative situation-communicative act.
- ✓ Error correction.
- ✓ Learning monitoring.

**Psychological dimension:**

- ✓ Individual and group characterization of the trainees.
- ✓ Socio-psychological climate of the group.
- ✓ Psychological maturity of the trainee.
- ✓ Affective relationships among the learners in the group.
- ✓ Interests and motives for learning the English language.
- ✓ Willingness to participate.
- ✓ Individual and group learning rhythms.

**Physiological dimension:**

- ✓ Articulatory capabilities.
- ✓ Auditory ability.
- ✓ Memory development.
- ✓ Clarity and spontaneity of speech.

**Sociological dimension:**

- ✓ Human relations in the learning group
- ✓ Acceptance in the group
- ✓ Empathy

**Organizational dimension:**

- ✓ Number of trainees in the group
- ✓ Schedule
- ✓ Weekly frequencies
- ✓ Furniture
- ✓ Hygiene
- ✓ Acoustics.

## **Conclusions**

The programs and courses for the teaching-learning of the English language in young learners and adults have methodological, gnoseological, ideological and socio-cultural supports that respond to social interests, conceived on the basis of the social construction of knowledge with a high level of updating.

The age debate for English language learning offers advantages and disadvantages for the different age groups that are essential to take into consideration in order to determine what optimal conditions are required to achieve developmental learning in young people and adults.

The use of dimensions and indicators typify the optimal conditions for English language learning, because although they are inexhaustible to direct the teaching-learning process, they can constitute a theoretical support to take it to the pedagogical practice by the teacher with young and adult learners in the current Cuban context.